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No. 196

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

December 1st, 1943

DEAR MEMBER,

The thoughts of many of our members will have been turned to India by the special prayers offered in the churches last Sunday and by the accounts in our newspapers of the famine in Bengal.

THE FAMINE IN INDIA

The facts revealed in the debate in the House of Commons, in the speech of Sir M. Azizul Huque, Food Member of the Government of India,[1] and in the press, make grim reading. The death roll alone is shocking: a thousand a week in Calcutta itself and many more in the outlying districts of Bengal. To this we must add the terrible sufferings of those who have sold their possessions in a desperate effort to get food or left their homes in the hope of finding relief elsewhere. One correspondent speaks of the outbreak of cholera as "the biggest epidemic in modern times." The famine is most severe in Bengal, but other parts of India as far apart as Orissa and Travancore are in great distress.

This tragedy reinforces the growing conviction that nutrition must have priority in Allied planning after the war. India has never been adequately fed. By improved organization we have prevented any great famine in the last fifty years. But food production has not kept pace with increasing population,[2] and most of the people of India live on the margin of subsistence. A few million people eating an extra ¼ lb. of food a day is enough to create a shortage. The war has drawn two million men into the army and several million more into war industries and defence works. They have received either more food or more money than they have had before. Prices have soared in consequence. No doubt there has been some malicious hoarding for fatter profits, but in a country where only one person in ten can read, and radio is still a novelty, rumour holds unrivalled sway. Panic fear of invasion and shortage made every man clutch what he had for fear of worse to come.

We all have a share in the responsibility for this calamity—hoarders and rumour-mongers, provincial Governments which did not know the facts, the central Government which did not plan to prevent inflation and scarcity, the Government and people of this country who are still ultimately responsible for the welfare of India. We shall only get out of the crisis by drawing on every possible source of help. The Govern-

[1] Published as a White Paper, India: *The Food Situation* 1943. H.M. Stationery Office, price 6d.

[2] The increase in the population of India in the last 50 years equals the total population of the U.S.A.

ment is sending food, the Canadian Government has given 100,000 tons of wheat, and the New Zealand Government 37,000 cases of condensed milk, and voluntary organizations are already at work on relief. The army is to help in distribution, giving supplies and lending doctors. The one thing lacking is the united effort of Indian leaders who could stimulate self-help is beyond our powers.

The following letter comes from Horace Alexander. He, in a way, has the closest personal links with Indian leaders, and has just returned from a year in India organizing the work of the Friends Ambulance Unit. His letter poses the question whether the present calamity may not be made a means by which we can begin to build a bridge over the deep chasm which separates Englishmen and Indians to-day. He writes :—

" No Christian can be happy about the present state of affairs in India. For over a year the leaders of the most important political party have been kept in detention. To the British Government the paramount consideration must be the successful prosecution of the war. How can they tolerate the activity of men who have refused to co-operate in the war effort, have preached against participation in it under existing circumstances, and have finally threatened to launch a campaign to force the Government to hand over power ? Have Indian leaders really faced the difficulties of an administrative upheaval in the midst of war ? If not, do they not thereby prove themselves unfit for responsibility ? Above all, how can we do business to-day with a pacifist like Gandhi ?

" This is how it appears to most people in England, including many who want to see India free at the earliest possible moment.

" It does not look like that in India. Even those who most deplored the Congress proposal to start a mass civil disobedience movement in August, 1942, are disgusted at the repeated refusal of the Government to allow such a man as Mr. Rajagopalachari, who has the confidence of the Moslem League on the one hand and on the other is still on terms of intimacy with Mahatma Gandhi—though strongly disagreeing with his attitude to the war—to have access to him, to the Congress President, Maulana Abul Kalam Azed, to Pundit Jawaharlai Nehru, and to the other members of the Congress Working Committee. Some notable Congress men outside jail believe that the time has come to rescind the resolution of August, 1942. Perhaps those in jail are thinking along similar lines. Would anything be lost if the Government permitted some of their friends who are free to ascertain whether they are willing now to recommend a change of policy ?

" This official rigidity has caused widespread resentment and despair in India. We must not delude ourselves that the two million Indian soldiers who are fighting with the Allied armies, and the increased Indian industrial output are proof that the Congress has ceased to count, or that the whole trouble arises from the conflict between Gandhi and the Congress on the one side, and Jinnah and the Moslem League on the other. Moslem Leaguers and Liberals, Indian Ministers and officials, and non-political Indians resent just

as deeply as any Congressman the British refusal to allow them to take their own autonomous part in this mighty struggle of world forces. Axis propaganda is constantly playing up our policy of 'repression' in India. In America, in China and elsewhere friends of England are unhappy at the prospect of this 'running sore.' In this country, even those who appreciate the force of the Government case, must be gravely concerned at the indefinite continuance of the deadlock.

"Is there really no way out? Surely no Christian can ever admit that such an unhappy state of affairs can be dismissed even till the end of the war as 'hopeless.' Does the famine that is now afflicting India perhaps provide a gleam of hope? When men are at variance and seemingly irreconcilable, to be forced to stand and work together may furnish the solvent to very stubborn resentments and misunderstandings. Ten years ago, the province of Bihar was shaken by a terrible earthquake. Then, as now, the Congress was in conflict with the Government. But Mr. Gandhi and his colleague, Rajondra Prasad, beloved by the Bihar peasants, immediately offered their co-operation to the Government; they went among the famine-stricken people, preached self-help, organized assistance, worked with the officials. Is it possible that they would do the same to-day if they were free?

"For nearly three years Mr. Gandhi has seen that famine was coming to India, and has been urging that measures be taken in time; and now it has to be confessed that adequate measures were not taken. To get out of the pit of famine all must work together, and that means calling for the help, among others, of some at least of those who to-day are being held in detention. Lord Wavell has made a good impression by going at once, on his arrival in India as Viceroy, to the famine districts, seeing things for himself, speaking out frankly.

"Co-operation in fighting the famine would not, of course, immediately solve the political problem. There will be stubborn obstacles still to be removed. But Gandhi's pacifism is of the kind that permits him to give moral support to a war effort provided he is convinced that the fighters (although he rejects the weapons) deserve moral support. That is the thing he and his colleagues doubt to-day. A common effort to save the famine victims might radically change their outlook. A first step taken on to a firm rock of righteousness will show the way to the next step."

When figures about the number of political prisoners in India were given to the House of Commons in July, 23,286 persons were serving sentences for acts of sabotage or violence, and 12,704 Congressmen were under detention in jail. Among these last are included not only professional politicians, but skilled social workers and many hundreds of men and women of long experience in local government. The British are spread out very thin over India: the main burden of day-to-day administration falls on the shoulders of a class which, because of the backwardness of the country in education, cannot be suddenly enlarged to meet war-time emergencies. The shortage of personnel is one argument for seeking to release the prisoners. The desirability of getting Indian leaders to begin working together is another. But Lord Wavell

has to make a difficult decision. With an offensive to relieve China pending, the British Government cannot take any action which would imperil the security of its base in India. If the released prisoners feel themselves bound on release to go back to their home towns all over India and paralyse administration by renewing civil disobedience, the Government cannot do other than say " no " to any suggestion of release. What is the right decision in a matter on which such far-reaching consequences depend can be determined only by those who know all the facts. Lord Wavell and his advisers ought to be continually remembered in our prayers.

SUPPLEMENT BY THE ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY

The issue of the Christian News-Letter for December 29th will include a twelve-page Supplement by the Archbishop of Canterbury, dealing with the task of Christians in secular society, and the basis of Christian citizenship. He asks what, in the actual historical situation of to-day, are the basic affirmations with which Christians must confront what has become in a large degree an alien world, and gives the answer in certain crucial decisions to which Christians are committed by the Christian understanding of the nature of reality. He has written the Supplement in the light of a good deal of corporate thinking that has taken place in recent years, and believes that the affirmations are the expression not merely of his own individual mind, but of a widespread and growing agreement about the essential meaning of the present situation and its challenge to Christians.

The fundamental ideas of the Supplement have already had a large influence in shaping the outlook of the Christian News-Letter. But the formulation by the Archbishop gives them a new definiteness, and we propose to relate our future thinking and policy to these key conceptions.

The publication of this Supplement is an opportunity for making the Christian News-Letter more widely known and enlarging its membership. If you can help in this endeavour by making a subscription to the Christian News-Letter a Christmas gift to a friend, please let us have your order by December 8th. A form for this purpose was attached to our last issue.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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THE CHRISTIAN NEWS-LETTER

Supplement to No. 196

DECEMBER 1ST, 1943

RESPONSIBILITY AND POWER

MY DEAR OLDHAM,

You have suggested that I should try to arrange on paper some of my haphazard reflections on the subject of responsibility and power. Your readers may reasonably expect such a topic to be pursued within the framework already set by your supplement of September 8th on "Responsibility in the Economic System," and by Mr. Basil Smallpeice's valuable contribution of April 21st on "The Managers of Industry." But the investigation of the situation in industry, commerce and finance must be developed, and the suggestions for its improvement made, by those whose minds are more versed in economic theory, and better furnished with illustrations from various types of business, than mine: I could refer only to the publishing industry, which is a very special case. On the other hand, there seems to be a place for a general consideration of the two terms *responsibility* and *power*, for which there is some advantage in being unencumbered by knowledge of industrial details. In your supplement of September 8th to which I have referred, mention is made of a widespread suspicion of hidden nefariousness in economic power, and a common yearning to see it replaced, or strictly controlled, by political power: this gives some justification for examining the two terms responsibility and power in greater abstraction.

We may perhaps come at the meaning of *responsibility* more readily if we consider it in relation to the meaning of *irresponsibility*. By irresponsibility we may mean one of two things, which the context usually makes clear enough. When we speak of a dictator or despot as irresponsible, we may mean simply that there is no other power to which he is *accountable*: he may be prudent, just, wise and firm; he may be more benevolent and beloved than a fabulous Haroun al Raschid; he may immolate his private life to the well-being of his subjects —yet in so far as his power is absolute, it can truly be called "irresponsible." In practice, of course (we need not quote Lord Acton again) this irresponsibility is likely, is almost certain, to be attended by, to give rise to, what we call moral *irresponsibility*. Even if he be a well-meaning man, not addicted to any of the grosser abuses of tyranny, the despot may confound person and position, overrate his own wisdom, excuse faults in himself which he would not tolerate in a subject, and, in short, instead of identifying himself with his people, identify his people with himself.

The pure tyrant, such as I have just sketched, is an abstraction hardly realized except in the darker pages of oriental history. The modern political dictator usually owes his position in the first place to some moral ascendency which he has gained over other men: his position may be attained by influence over the mob; it can only be

preserved by influence over his lieutenants and over those minor centres of power whose compliance is essential to him. And *influence* is a form of power which is omnipresent: it is something which nearly everyone exercises in one relation of life or another; something indeed which no one can escape exercising, for a very large part of influence is unconscious both in the exertion and in the submission. A person who has never had the slightest influence on another could hardly be said to exist. The influence of the artist, as of the philosopher, is peculiar: he cannot do good work for the sake of the power of influence; when he is shown evidence of his particular influence on other artists or philosophers he may not recognize it, or he may be highly dissatisfied with the results: yet, he, like any other man, is greatly gratified by the thought that his work has been "influential."

I call attention to influence as power only as a caution against assuming that the different kinds of power can be wholly separated from each other. I return to the subject of the two senses of "responsibility." When we find anything wrong, for instance, in the economic sphere, we may assume: (1) there is nothing wrong with the system, but there is something wrong with *man*; (2) there is nothing wrong with the system, but the *men* who administer it are wrong 'uns; (3) what is wrong is not the men, still less mankind, but the system; (4) both the system and those who administer it are bad. These variations are playing on the meanings of "irresponsibility." In other words, we tend to think, at any moment, in terms of *it* or in terms of *they*, in terms of things or in terms of persons; or we may be thinking of things as if they were persons, and of persons as if they were things. And to think justly, we have to appreciate, in each concrete situation, which attitude is going to make affairs *better*. And we have to be always on guard for the moment at which *it* becomes *they*, or *they* become *it*. To put what I mean in these words is, I am well aware, a violent simplification. To present it with the necessary qualifications, I should have not only to analyse a particular situation, but to analyse the attitude of a hypothetical observer towards that situation.

Some years ago there was, in some quarters, a tendency to believe that politics was all a matter of economics, and that the affairs of the nation would be more efficiently handled if the politicians were dismissed and replaced by business men. It would be just as mistaken to imagine that a thoroughgoing subordination of business to politics would solve our difficulties. For there are several types of power, each with its own sphere; and it is not healthy, in a commonwealth, when any one type of power exercises unlimited sway—even if the centre of that power is denominated "the people." There is the power of the politicians, the power of the military, of the judiciary, of the various industrial, agricultural and other material interests; the powers of the journalist and even of the artist must not be overlooked; and finally the power of the Church. The areas are not clearly defined; it is better that they should not be; for in an active society, we must expect each centre of power to claim rather more than is appropriate to it, and the balance to be preserved by a wholesome contest. But in general

it seems right that power should be specialized, and that those who exercise power in one sphere should *recognize authority* over themselves in other spheres. It is power arrogating other powers to itself, *power* in the generalized form, that arouses our most passionate sense of grievance. And there is, it seems to me, the need for an examination of cases of mixed power, and of overlapping power, in the contemporary world. Notably in the press. Under what conditions is the power of the owners (or of the managers) liable to encroach upon the powers of the editor? The situation of journalism provides a peculiarly interesting problem of areas of power in our time.

I should like to make clear that I am not here concerned with the problems that arise from any one individual or group acquiring *too much* power, but with those which arise from the possession and exercise of power *inappropriate* to an individual or group. And I do not wish to flatter the prejudices of those (for instance) who hold that the legislature and the administration should have *no* control over "private enterprise." Such persons are often defining areas according to their own convenience; and cases are not unknown in which people who have wanted "freedom" in one context have wanted "protection" in another—sometimes quite justly, but nevertheless, protection is also control. As the world is constantly in change anyway, we are obliged to make deliberate changes, from time to time, if only to preserve. It is only wisdom—which is able to grasp both the permanent and the immediate—which can safeguard us from both the *doctrinaire* and the merely expedient; and if wisdom fails, there is no use in worrying about anything. Anyone will have quite misunderstood the foregoing outline if he supposes that it is intended to give any direct guidance as to what we should do, or what we should leave undone, at the present time. If the reader then asks, "So of what value can be such ruminations as these?" I am afraid that I have not here the space, or he the time, for elucidation: for those who are anxious to get something done are often impatient with those who, while they may accept the programme, linger over abstract notions of what a good society would be like.

The commonalty is in good health when there is an effective harmony of interests, such that the rulers, acting in their own interest, are also acting in the interest of those whom they rule. Such a harmony of interests (even with a great deal of incidental selfishness, exploitation and oppression) always exists, or appears to exist, when any ruling class is flourishing in undisputed power; it is temporarily in evidence at any moment of national crisis. In course of time one of two things may happen, or both: the ruling class may lose its grasp of its own essential interests, and exercise its power only in a narrow and blind self-interest; or the social circumstances may so alter, through economic or other developments, that the centre of political power shifts, or should shift, to another class. The real crime of the French aristocracy of the old regime was not that it claimed the rights of *le mariage de Figaro*, or committed the picturesque excesses made familiar by Carlyle, but that it had ceased to have visible interests in common with the mass of the people.

A healthy ruling class may be said to have an "unconscious" sense of responsibility—to put it in the form of paradox. Its power, if it is political power, will be limited by the authority of other centres of power, as well as by constitutional and legislative restraints. This "unconscious responsibility," through a lucky community of interest with the rest of the people, is all that we can expect of most of the members of the class; but I do not think that such a class can thrive long unless it produces individuals, superior to itself, who have a high and very conscious sense of moral responsibility both to their fellow-men of all classes and to God; and unless these superior individuals, by the example they set and the influence they exert, impose a kind of respect for moral law upon the other members of their class who are less sensitive. Such a sense of social responsibility can, furthermore, be transmitted by domestic influence from one generation to another; on the other hand, it may easily decay. There is no recipe for social stability.

This pattern of powers in society, in which each individual, and each group of individuals, exercises an appropriate power and to the proper exercise of other powers gives its assent (ideally, intelligent and understanding assent) seems to me to illustrate the nature of "justice" in the Platonic sense. (Nobody can be quite sure how other people's domestic business is carried on; but I imagine that a successful *ménage* is one in which the couple, as a couple, delegates, partly by a process of trial and error, authority in different matters to one or the other partner, according to their different capacities.) To point to a society in which this "justice" has been perfectly exemplified is impossible; we arrive at an apprehension of it rather by studying the decline of justice through which societies have fallen into disorder—either the transgression of power beyond its proper limits, or the abdication of it within them, leads to revolutionary disaffection. Often the discontent expresses itself in a clamour for "equality," which simply represents the swing of the pendulum the other way.

I may have put these reflections both too abstractly and too dogmatically: if so, the fault comes through trying to say too much in a little space. Whether they appear to have any bearing on the important problems with which you are concerned, I do not know; my aim was to indicate a farther perspective from which it might be profitable, now and again, to contemplate them.

Yours sincerely,

T. S. Eliot.

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